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Conversations with fathers

Introduction - Jon

‘Conversations with Fathers’ is a project at the University of Bristol, which has been set up to promote and facilitate conversations with fathers and about fatherhood. It is based on the idea that we need to talk more, and more realistically, about fatherhood, and aims to create a space for the conversations about fatherhood that it might be difficult to have, as well as showcase and celebrate what is great about fatherhood.

We want to learn about fatherhood by speaking to fathers themselves, and documenting what they like about being a father, what is challenging, and what they think other (or future) fathers ought to know. We also want to speak to children about their fathers, and think about things that children of any age might want to say to their fathers. We are also interested in conversations between fathers and their parenting partners. Above all, we aim to promote thought and reflection about fatherhood, and to explore and portray the realities of modern fatherhood - both the highs and the lows.

One of the conversations that is perhaps most difficult to have is around mental health. Matt, one of the fathers involved in the project and lead-author of this piece, talked to us on film about his experience of illness and how it affected him as a father and as a partner. This story is being produced as a series of video clips, and will be available on the Conversations with Fathers website. Below is a lightly edited transcript of our conversation in which Matt told some of his story.

My story - Matt

What I like about being a father

Hi, my name's Matt Ashley. I'm a solicitor based in Bristol, and I'm forty later on this year. I'm married to Rachel, we've got two children, a daughter, Millie, who's three and a half, and a son, William, who's four and half months. Fatherhood was something that took me a while to get used to. But now it's something I love and a really big part of my identity.

It's sometimes like being a kids' TV presenter, to a certain extent. Having that extra enthusiasm when you're hungover or tired, that you didn't really know you had; but you find you have energy reserves that have never been tested before, and doing it in a positive happy way. And I think the end result, if you like, is an amazing warm feeling inside that, although people tell you it's the best thing you'll ever do, you'll never feel that warmth until you have your own kid, and they run up to you when you pick them up from nursery and they just give you a cuddle. I can't put a value, or put that into words, I can just feel that.

I think at its most basic level fatherhood is an identity, in that it's how you talk about fatherhood, it's how passionate you are about it. And because it's part of my identity, it gives me a lot of enjoyment and a love of seeing my kids develop. Now my daughter is of an age where she can answer back and be a bit cheeky, and be sarcastic, I enjoy being funny

with her, and teaching her things that she perhaps shouldn't do - which gets me told off and my daughter told off.

I also love seeing her evolve and developing her interests. And also the hope about the future, about what she should achieve and where she wants to go, and allowing her to do that and guiding her through that. And with William as well, seeing him; I suppose the interest of the difference between a girl and a boy growing up.

My experience of pregnancy and birth

When we first had Millie it was a bit of an awe inspiring experience. It started, I suppose, as quite a stressful experience, in that Rachel's pregnancy with Millie was not as planned. She had quite a lot of health episodes, and was admitted to see various medical practitioners throughout her pregnancy. And then in the last month she was admitted three times with suspected pre-eclampsia. On the third occasion Millie was induced, as she was overdue, and that whole experience of not having been through it before, and the 'will you, won't you, will you, won't you' each time, you begin to wonder if you'll get the baby or not. It was quite, well very, stressful, with hindsight. That combined with trying to juggle paternity leave at work, and not knowing whether I'd be having to be drop everything at a moment's notice was hard.

Rachel's labour with Millie was tough as well. It took about forty hours for her to come out, which resulted in an emergency C-section. Mille was fine, but we both didn't know if there would be health issues with her, or with Rachel. So it was all very stressful as a result, and then with the added issues of being a new parent and bringing home your firstborn. I suspect every dad who's ever been through that is a little bit dumbstruck in 'what do I do? How do I help my wife or partner? How do I help my son or daughter?'

During the labour I was doing nothing other than sitting, feeling helpless - which I think was a lot of the cause of my anxiety that came out afterwards. Sort of a lack of control and not really knowing what was going on. My own experience of stressful events is that you have a stressful event and then you have a sort of outwash from them. If you've got time to just take stock and rest you get over it quite quickly. With a new baby rest is thrown out the window, so after Millie's birth, and Rachel and Millie came home, rather than being able to relax, actually the stress was ramped up again because we were out of that medicalised environment, but on our own. And the lack of sleep, the lack of understanding of how to care for a newborn, the lack of understanding with my wife as to what had changed and how we then interacted, just added layers to the stress, which we think as a family caused my depression.

Depression and erectile dysfunction

Nobody preps you for this. Everyone preps you for the perfect birth, and it will go normally, and you hear these terms banded around, but I didn't know what pre-eclampsia was until Rachel was admitted with it and had wires coming out of her body, and I was being told by a midwife and a gynaecologist that our baby's at risk. It's a very factual, very medical approach to what is a very emotional time.

I didn't know that I was suffering from anxiety, everything happened so quickly it's a bit of a blur. I look back on the first three months of Millie's life now, and I can remember certain events that happened, like her first Christmas or taking her to my parents for the first time. But I have a blank about what my emotions were. I felt very insular, and I remember thinking 'when will this end? When will normality come back? How do I get out of this? It was like a wanting escape, not suicidal tendencies, but I wanted to run away from a stressful situation. And it took some time over the new year period of being at home long enough to sort of not worry about work and not having family visit, that I just broke down on my wife's shoulder and cried, and we realised something was wrong then, that we needed some help, that this was not normal. This had gone on longer than adjustment to the baby coming home and going back to work after paternity leave.

So we went to my doctor, originally because I was suffering from erectile dysfunction, as we tried several times to resurrect our sex life after the birth and Rachel's recovery from her C-section. And we sort of said it seems psychological, if you like, not anything health related. I did a series of tests for diabetes and other issues to rule that out, and the doctor concluded that I was suffering from depression. He didn't prescribe me any anti-depressants, but instead referred me to a charity called 'Hope's Place' which specialised in family based counselling. I had ten sessions with one of their counsellors - literally just to cry it out. I remember coming back from the second or third session with the counsellor and saying to Rachel that it feels like my brain has been given a massage. Like when you have a sports massage and the physiotherapist rubs your muscles, it suddenly feels calm and lovely. The counselling had the same effect on my mind, and for the first time in about five months I actually felt relaxed. And I think those were the seeds of learning to do fatherhood, or giving me the confidence that I could do fatherhood. Although it took a while to recover, a lot of it was about me seeing myself as a dad.

How life changed on becoming a father

I think we approached what we should do as new parents very pragmatically, as in what were the skills we needed, if you like, to look after a new baby. We did NHS antenatal classes and we did NCT antenatal classes, which taught us the basics of nappy changing, breast feeding, birthing technique. What it didn't teach us are the emotional responses of parenthood, and the softer side of how the dynamic of being a couple changes to becoming a three.

I think the changes worked on lots of levels. There is the change that I went through individually as effectively a man with a wife but no real other responsibilities, to having a dependent and what that did emotionally to me. There was the change of being a partner; how did I support my wife?, which was a big thing for me because a lot of people had talked about my role as being supportive, but they didn't say how I would be supportive. They just talked about 'you need to support', and there was no list of things to follow or things to do that I could help my wife with. And then there was the added dynamic of how we worked as a couple, and the changes in our relationship, so sexually, emotionally and just time spent with each other as we were used to.

Once I accepted fatherhood, in the same way as I accepted wearing glasses the first time I had to put them on, or accepted I was asthmatic as a kid, or I accepted I couldn't play rugby anymore because of a knee injury, it allowed me to move on.

It's a bit like a grieving process I suppose. My wife and I used to have a really nice life. This may sound quite selfish but we met the love of our life, we had our own home, we were both earning, we used to have nice holidays, a lot of disposable income, and lot of choice and free time over what we could or couldn't do, a lot of discretion about what we did, and that suddenly went out the window. It might sound an odd way of describing it, but there's the stages of bereavement, and you get to the point that fatherhood is actually Ok, and you can do this, and life exists after the birth of your first child.

Seeking, and getting, help

I'd suffered with depression twice before, once when I was doing my finals at University, once after my grandfather committed suicide, so I knew what depression was and what it looked like. That helps, because like any other illness if you've suffered it once then you can identify it again. As for seeking help for the depression I suffered after Millie's birth, I think that was prompted by me crying on my wife's shoulder and acknowledging something was wrong. She was the one that then gave me the proverbial kick up the backside to say you need to go and get this treated. Firstly because she didn't want to see me suffer, but also because I felt, now, having spoken to her, she felt unsupported. She was dealing with it all herself, and with an ill husband. I think she also wanted me to get better quickly so I could be an equal parent with her. So I would thank her for giving me the solution.

What the treatment pathway was, I don't think anyone knew, and we had to seek help ourselves to find the relevant specialists. Once we were within the system, both having been to Hope's Place and a referral to an organisation called 'LIFT', which I now know as Avon Psychological Services, or Bristol and South Gloucester Psychological Services. Once you are on their register it's very easy to access the correct psychological healthcare practitioner. Although there's waiting list, the door is open and you're just waiting to walk through it. But getting to those organisations is quite difficult, and luckily I had a GP who was aware of depressive illness and willing to say it's not anything physiologically wrong with you, you have an illness of the mind, here's how we can help.

We also, as a couple, sought some private counselling, with a psycho-sexual therapist. When I had recovered fully from the depression we went and saw the lady for, I think, ten sessions of what effectively re-booted our sex life. And we stopped trying to have sex, let me recover, and she helped us, coached us, back to full love-making, and it in fact improved our sex life if anything. But that was something we identified as a couple after my illness had recovered.

Things I might have done differently

With hindsight I should have asked Rachel, my wife, what support she wanted, but I didn't. I just assumed that she wanted me to do everything, so she could look after the baby. So I ended up doing all of the housework, all of Millie's bottles for when she wasn't being

breastfed, all of the nappy washing because we used reusable nappies rather than disposable nappies. All of the shopping, feeding of the cats, changing the linen, all of that running of the home type stuff, so I could leave Rachel just to care for the baby. And she got quite frustrated with that, because she said that she just felt like a cow, just being milked all the time either by an expression pump or by Mille herself, and she never left the sofa because she was just holding the baby. And she wanted to do a bit of normal stuff as well. And I think not doing anything with the baby delayed my emotional bonding with her as well.

I think I'd wished I'd talked to my partner more about how things would change after we had a child. And not how things would change with the child, but between us. A bit like when you get married you have the conversation 'ooh, will it be different? Will there be roses the other side of the threshold?' – and we had that conversation just between the two of us before we got married. We didn't do that with children. And I think you're too caught up in the buying of the pram, the buying of a car seat, the euphoria of painting a nursery to actually stop and take stock of how this little thing that comes home with you from hospital is going to fundamentally change everything about your existence.

Taking paternity leave and finding work/life balance

My firm offer two weeks paid paternity leave, which is relatively easily accessible because I'd seen other dads do it, and there's information on it on our internal staff intranet. I didn't explore the government statutory route because I knew that I could get effectively two weeks paid holiday in addition rather than having to apply for it. I found the paternity leave experience quite daunting, because it's like preparing to go on holiday but you don't know when you go on holiday, so you're constantly having to keep on top of every bit of your work and finish work with an empty desk every night. And when you go on holiday you can gear up to that, and you can work a couple of nights late and then leave things with colleagues. Doing it for several weeks in the run up to Millie's birth was really tough. With William it was slightly less so, partly because of the time of year he was born, I was less busy, but also because I'd managed client's and colleague's better having had the experience before.

I also took a month off with William, whereas I only took a fortnight off with Millie. And I can wholeheartedly say to any new dad, if you can afford it and your employer will allow you to do it, take the month, because it allows you to develop the new normal a lot quicker. Two weeks in with a newborn you're still learning and people are still coming round giving you presents. After a month, actually things are a bit more stable. And I think it allowed me to bond with William a lot quicker; spend time making our new family, which we had moved from three to four, a lot quicker. And also, I didn't go back to work feeling like I'd left the most important thing at home, which I did first time around. My return to work first time I felt a bit adrift, which is probably partly due to my mental state, but also due to the fact that I hadn't sort of finished that 'becoming a new dad' process. So I felt there was much more important things at home that I wanted to focus on. I was distracted in work when I went back.

In terms of balance with family life, I think before I had children my career was relatively more important to me. It still is important to me, but it's importance has decreased relative to the weight I place on my family now.

I'm a solicitor, so I often have pressures to work late. Normally I find that if it's a diary appointment then I'll know about it a week or so in advance and that can be scheduled in. It's when a client rigs me up and says 'I need this done now' and it's four o'clock in the afternoon, and I know that then won't be finished until ten o'clock, that it means I have ring up and say 'I'm sorry, Daddy won't be home for bedtime tonight. I'll skype you, and we can say night night over the phone', which Millie has had to get used to. We had a point 18 months ago where she used to throw my wife's mobile phone across the room because daddy wasn't going to be home, but she's grown up with seeing that. And with having William now, I find I'm home even more for bedtime.

I have to juggle work via remote technology and flexible working. I leave early to do the nursery run, do bedtime, and then log back in. Luckily my employer is very sympathetic to that, and they positively encourage family and parental engagement.

If was asked to give advice for other dads

I'd start by asking you 'have you talked to your wife, girlfriend, partner about what you think you may feel, what will they feel, how do you feel that you will change together?' And then, if you're going to be the one giving the primary care and taking the time off work, then what support do you need? Conversely, if you're the parent who is going back to work after a short amount of paternity leave, what support does your partner need? And actually, identify some things. It's a bit like making a list of the household chores and divvying them up. And you may require flexibility, and that may change, but it at least gives you a starting template that you've agreed on, rather than scrabbling around not knowing what works.

And then I would say, when the baby's born, just take time for yourself. Sit in a dark room and think. Go for a coffee with some friends, go for a coffee on your own, or go for a coffee with the baby and give mum some time off. But take time to just think, how do you feel about this? Are you doing it OK? How can you improve? How are you going to still make time for yourself as a man, as an individual, as a friend, as a team player, as a colleague, rather than just as a partner of a new mum and as a new father.

Men are notoriously bad about talking about emotional stuff, particularly where they either aren't confident about it or can see their masculinity compromised. I think the conversations that the duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry have been having recently are brilliant for removing the taboo, because there's no need for a taboo. Everyone you ever see who comments on that, they never say 'oh go away and man up', they actually say 'well done for talking about it'. And everyone I've spoken to about the illness I suffered, people have been really supportive, which is why I like to talk about it so I can help.

Just be aware that having a new baby is one of the most stressful things you can probably do. So, like I was talking about, taking time for yourself just be aware that you need to look

after yourself. And I don't mean physically, but you need to make sure your head's in the right place, and that you are vulnerable to it not being in the right place.

Final words - Jon

We really appreciate Matt's contribution to the project and for talking so openly about his experience. To find out more about the Conversations with Father's project, and to see other conversations, go to: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/conversations-with-fathers/>